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CONTESTING SUFISM TODAY

Contemporary Sufi and anti-Sufi responses

The 20th century has witnessed an unprecedented marginalization of Sufism within Islamic communities. During no previous era of Islamic history have Sufis come under such concerted and widespread attack, with their very place in Islam coming under question. The recent destruction of Sufi shrines is only the most visible manifestation of a much wider attempt to purge Sufism from Islam. Whether in Mali or France, the United States, Iraq, or Pakistan, anti-Sufi movements have established themselves, in many cases displacing Sufism from its previously assumed place in the lives of Muslims. The rich traditions of Sufi art, architecture, poetry, music, and philosophy that shaped Muslim life and thought are erased from historical memory and purged from normative conceptions of Islam. This displacement occurs as mosques are stocked with free literature that either totally neglects Sufism or warns against Sufi deviations. As a number of scholars have observed, many pamphlets found in mosques offer a reductionist, homogeneous picture of Islam, one divorced from historical context, Muslim diversity and debate.¹ A single strand of Islamic thought is presented as the only sort of Islam there is, erasing Sufism from the picture entirely. Alongside the proliferation of this form of “pamphlet Islam,” local preachers the world over are offered scholarships to study Islam at well-funded Salafi schools, such as the Islamic University of Medina, and return from their studies with a mission to convince their communities to abandon Sufi practices, again promoting a particular interpretation as the final word on Islam. Well-funded, aggressive Salafi militias form in conflict regions and intimidate and silence Sufis. Globally then, Sufism becomes at the very least suspect, and in many cases actively opposed, maligned, and proscribed.

To continue our discussion of Sufism’s place in Islam, we begin by noting that, as in the premodern period, contemporary debates over Sufism are ultimately debates over orthodoxy: Which Islamic beliefs and practices are legitimate? What counts as Islamic? What does it mean to be Muslim? As anthropologist and scholar

of religion Talal Asad has suggested, orthodoxy is always a reflection of who has the power to establish their understanding of Islam as “normative,” “official,” and “orthodox.”² Most major Islamic sects and schools of thought have produced institutions of authority, the representatives of which simultaneously claim orthodoxy for themselves while classifying other sects as heretical. As power shifts, so too does orthodoxy. Orthodoxy, then, is more dynamic than it is often portrayed to be by its proponents, and there are of course a number of competing claims to orthodoxy. Who has the power to fund, establish, and promote institutions, teachers, and literature as orthodox? The success of a particular interpretation of Islam (and its impact on Sufism) is closely tied to this question, as we see in this chapter.

The 19th century witnessed the erosion of classical Sunni Islam’s religious and political institutions. European encroachment increasingly threatened the Ottoman Empire, which ruled over Islam’s heartland in the Middle East and North Africa. Ottoman rulers struggled with the imperative to modernize and Westernize, against conservative pressures to maintain traditional authority structures dominated by the *‘ulama* and Sufi orders. Military failure and territory loss eventually forced the modernization of the Ottoman military, justice, and education systems. In 1826, the Ottomans dissolved and repressed the famed Janissaries (dominated by the Bektashi Sufi order). That same year, the system of religious endowments (*awqaf*) that funded institutions of Islamic jurisprudence began to be brought under direct government control and gradually dismantled.³ The Ottoman free trade agreement with the British in 1838 opened Turkish cities to European merchants, money, and cultural influence. Under Sultan ‘Abd al-Majid I (d. 1861) a series of far-reaching reforms known as the Tanzimat (“reorganization”) were inaugurated. Though prefaced with references to Islamic sources, the Tanzimat reforms “aimed to create a legal and administrative system along Western, and more specifically French, lines.”⁴

The *‘ulama* were increasingly replaced with modern bureaucrats while *shari‘a* courts were sidelined in favor of state courts with Western-style legal codes. Islamic law became subsumed under state law (*qanuns*), losing most of its wider social significance in regulating Ottoman life by the end of the 19th century. In the 20th century, whether due to colonial rule or indigenous reform efforts, the *shari‘a* was reduced to family law in the vast majority of Muslim lands, from Algeria to Malaysia.⁵ Despite the displacement of Islamic institutions, Ottoman sultans still claimed leadership of Muslims as caliphs. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War, however, precipitated the rise of the secular Turkish state and the dissolution of the caliphate in 1924. The abolishment of this longstanding symbol of Muslim political unity, alongside widespread weakening of the institutions of Islamic law, meant that Muslims now lacked centralized authority to a degree rarely seen in Islamic history. Classical Sunnism had lost much of its institutional basis, opening up space for orthodoxy to be redefined.⁶ Since that time, many Muslims have longed for the return of a symbolic center to the Muslim *ummah*, which the caliph is thought to represent.

As Muslim societies struggled to gain their independence from European rule, questions regarding Islam’s role in the state, society, and spiritual life were paramount,

with few obvious answers. The Islamic tradition's encounter with modernity set off an "epistemological crisis," challenging Muslims to integrate, assimilate, or reject European Enlightenment thought and its concomitant political formations.⁷ Grand projects of secularization, Westernization, and nationalism in the first part of the 20th century (in countries like Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan) gave way to a religious backlash and revival in the second half of the century. The sound defeat of Arab states by Israel during the Six Day War in 1967 signified for many the failure of secular, nationalist leaders in the Middle East to bring about the promised prosperity, power, and cultural dynamism. Muslims were increasingly turning to Islam as an archive of symbols, principles, and cultural norms that could be mobilized to inform projects of social and political revival. Simply put, could Islam function as the ideological underpinning of a modern state and civil society? The 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran coincided with a global movement among Sunnis that sought to recreate the modern state on a purely Islamic basis. With the growth of revivalist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan al-Muslimeen*) in Egypt and the *Jama'at-i-Islami* in Pakistan, visible signs of Islamic piety along with calls for Islamizing the state and culture returned to public life, as much on university campuses as in mosques. With the *al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya* – or "Islamic Awakening" as it was widely referred to in the 1980s and 1990s – Islam was back on the world stage, with debates over its nature amplified by its renewed social and political currency.

Contending Islamic paradigms

What sort of Islam was being revived? Muslim tradition suggests that a reviver (*Mujaddid*) emerges each century to revitalize Islam, to keep it vibrant, authentic, and purified of ossification and heresy. Muslims of various orientations have claimed their respective luminaries as the prophesied centennial reviver. In the 20th century, however, revivalist movements have tended to utilize a Salafi–Wahhabi paradigm, often filtered through popular preachers. The displacement (though by no means disappearance) of the *'ulama* created something of a vacuum in authority that has been filled by a cacophonous chorus of voices vying to define what exactly Islam is and what an Islamic society should look like. The most prominent voices in Muslim societies today tend to be lay activists, whose voices "echo from speakers in mosques, cars, computers, and television sets,"⁸ while "their pamphlets, books, essays, and columns pervade bookstores, newsstands, and the Internet."⁹ These new voices are in many ways reshaping how Islam is conceived, transmitted, and practiced. Abou El Fadl notes that:

The vacuum in authority meant not so much that *no one* could authoritatively speak for Islam, but that virtually *every* Muslim with a modest knowledge of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet was suddenly considered qualified to speak for the Islamic tradition and Shari'a law ... As these self-proclaimed and self-taught "jurists" reduced the Islamic heritage to the least common denominator, Islamic intellectual culture witnessed an unprecedented level of deterioration.¹⁰

Broadly speaking, the Islam of the revivalists combined a largely Wahhabi theological orientation with a reductive approach to Islamic texts, doctrines, and practices. Much of Islam's classical theological–philosophical tradition was shorn to make way for an Islam that could be easily mastered and applied by nonspecialists. The contrast between this new, revivalist form of Islam and the classical Islamic tradition, with its fusion of jurisprudence, philosophy, and Sufi spirituality, are considered here in terms of their approaches to the Qur'an, their contrasting understandings of key Islamic doctrines, and their notable differences in how Islamic knowledge is understood and transmitted. These differences underpin the larger debate today over the meanings of Islam and being Muslim, and how Sufism fits within these meanings.

Contrasting hermeneutics of the Qur'an and Hadith

As most revivalist leaders came from technical and professional backgrounds, they lacked the sophisticated interpretive tools developed over centuries by Muslim jurists and theologians. Jurists operated under the assumption that before the Qur'an could be interpreted and applied (as opposed to merely read for inspiration), the interpreter must have a mastery of the Arabic language, a thorough knowledge of the historical context in which each verse was revealed (*asbab al-nuzul*), and a mastery of jurisprudential methodology (*'usul al-fiqh*), which allowed for one to resolve conflicts between verses or between the Qur'an and other source texts. The basics of Greek philosophy, particularly logic, formed a key aspect of juristic training, further informing classical interpretations.¹¹ A set of skills thought to take decades to fully develop, this extensive background was, for most premodern Muslims, the prerequisite for a legitimate Quranic hermeneutic. Even when applied, however, the interpretation was always considered somewhat tentative, at best a close human approximation of the Divine meaning. Contrary to this approach, revivalist Muslim thinkers tended to read Islamic texts somewhat along the lines of technical manuals: a set of straightforward instructions, accessible to all, with a singular, readily apparent meaning, to be apprehended and then carried out. For the Qur'an to be approached in this manner, its meaning must be flattened out, so to speak, reduced to its surface appearance. This semantic “flattening out” of the text has some of its methodological roots in the thoughts of Ibn Taymiyya (as discussed in [Chapter 2](#)), who tended to equate literalism with true belief, arguing that God's attributes as described in the Qur'an, such as His “hands” and “face,” must be taken to be “literal” (*haqiqi*) attributes. He considered any metaphorical interpretation to be a deviation from the approach of the *salaf* and a dangerous destabilization of the text's clear meaning.¹²

As scholar of Islam A. Kevin Reinhart aptly observes, “the sustaining myth of the fundamentalist hermeneutic is that the text of scripture is transparent.”¹³ From the revivalist or “fundamentalist”¹⁴ perspective the Qur'an can be approached ahistorically, as a text whose meaning is clear and readily applicable with only a basic knowledge of Arabic needed. The socio-historical context of the text, the lexical

ambiguities and possibilities inherent in the Arabic, issues of logic, all must be set aside as simultaneously extraneous and dangerous. The contextual, linguistically indeterminate nature of the Qur'an is denied, with the exploration of its linguistic possibilities essentially erased as unnecessary to delve into, further fraught with the possibility of wandering astray. In contrast to the revivalist desire to narrow the semantic field of the Qur'an, Sufis have traditionally held that the text is "an ocean without shore,"¹⁵ the semantic possibilities of which are to be found not only in the application of linguistic, historical, and rational methods, but further excavated through contemplation.¹⁶ This contemplative approach to the text's deeper meaning was not thought to be suitable for all, however. Ibn al-'Arabi admonishes his readers to, "plunge into the ocean of the Qur'an if your breath is sufficiently powerful. If not, limit yourself to the study of the commentaries on its apparent sense; but in this case do not plunge, for you will perish."¹⁷

The orienting principle of Sufi hermeneutics is an understanding that reality is composed of both the apparent (*zahir*) and the hidden (*batin*).¹⁸ Similarly, the Qur'an has its apparent meanings, which can be accessed through linguistic and historical study (*'ilm*), and its ocean of hidden meanings, which are accessed through contemplation (*ma'rifa*). Contemplative knowledge "unveils" the Qur'an's inexhaustible depth, a depth that includes and transcends its surface appearance. For Sufis, this process is the "interpretation by allusion" (*tafsir bi-l-ishara*), in which the text's polysemous possibilities are symbolically "extracted" through an inward listening.¹⁹ Ibn al-'Arabi even went so far as to suggest that the meaning of the Qur'an is new each time it is recited by the one whose heart is open to its descent (*nuzul*). Even if the Arabic language is not understood, the meaning of the Qur'an for the particular person reciting it at that moment descends upon their heart. This means that the text can have a potentially infinite range of meanings that do not in all cases correlate with the outward sense of the text.²⁰ However, it is important to point out that Ibn al-'Arabi's hermeneutic was equally concerned to take seriously the letter of the text, to ensure that the various inner meanings of the Qur'an were drawn out of its literal meaning, with close attention paid to the linguistic, grammatical implications of each verse, an approach aptly described as "esoteric literalism."²¹

Revivalists summarily dismissed Sufi hermeneutics as unnecessarily opaque layers of interpretation that needed to be excised for the Qur'an's practical message to shine forth and fix political shortcomings in Muslim societies. This dismissal was a convenient interpretive paradigm for modern professionals who were untrained in Islam's classical sciences. Sufi and juristic Quranic interpretations informed by Aristotelian logic, Persian poetry, and Neoplatonic metaphysics were rejected as deviations from Islam's early purity, rather than valued as natural outgrowths of it, or doors through which to access it. In sum, for the sacred texts to be instrumentalized for modern programs of social and political reform, their meaning had to be reduced to their surface appearance.

Alongside the Qur'an, revivalists have tended to take authenticated Hadith reports of what Muhammad said or did at face value, rather than as probable reports

that must be carefully interpreted using Islamic legal methodology before being applied. Traditionally, Muslim interpreters simultaneously valued authenticated (*sahih*) Hadith as the most reliable indicators of the Prophet Muhammad's way or Sunna, while approaching them with caution in their attempts to formulate Islamic theology and law. Within the classical Sunni tradition, the only source texts that were thought to offer certain knowledge of God's words or the words of His Prophet were the Qur'an and a small number of Hadith, both of which were transmitted by so many people from generation to generation that a conspiracy of fabrication would be well-nigh impossible. These multiple (*mutawatir*) lines of transmission offered, for early Muslim scholars, a guarantor of authenticity. However, the vast majority of Hadith reports that were transmitted by the first generations of Muslims describing what Muhammad said and did have only one or two lines of transmission (*ahad*) – that is, they were passed down from one or two individuals to the next over generations until recorded by a Hadith collector (often two or three hundred years after the Prophet's death). Muslim scholars have hence suggested that even the most rigorously authenticated line of transmission (list of names of transmitters, each of whom is historically researched and verified) could only offer *probable* knowledge of the Prophet's words and actions, not *certain*, as, without the "checks and balances" offered by numerous lines of transmission, some sort of forgery was still possible, even if considered unlikely. This probable knowledge offered by Hadith with singular lines of transmission (*isnad*) was deemed to be of sufficient strength to allow for the use of Hadith to determine Muslim law and practice (though generally not issues of belief), though early Muslim jurists differed among themselves over the precise extent to which these Hadith could be used and how. For example, the founder of the Maliki school, Malik Ibn Anas (d. 795), suggested that authenticated Hadith could end up being a source of misguidance for Muslims if those reports were not understood in the context of the wider Muslim tradition of practice (*'amal*), especially as preserved by generations of knowledgeable elders in the Prophet's city, Medina. Abu Hanifa (d. 767), founder of the Hanafi school in Kufa, Iraq, was skeptical of much Hadith literature, and preferred to base his formulations of Islamic law on the Qur'an, the most widely transmitted Hadith, the teachings of the companions of the Prophet who settled in Kufa, and the rigorous application of human reasoning.

In contrast to the circumspection with which these early formulators of Islamic law approached and utilized Hadith, the contemporary revivalist movement has tended to assume that authenticated Hadith can be taken as offering unconvertible knowledge of Muhammad's Sunna that can be employed with very little critical interpretation. As an early example of this approach, the South Asian Ahl-e Hadith (or *Ahl al-Hadith* – literally "the people of Hadith") movement promoted a revivalist hermeneutic in the 19th century. This movement encouraged nonspecialist Muslims to derive their religious understanding directly from source texts without the mediation of expert interpretation, whether Sufi or juristic. Like the Wahhabis, the Ahl-e Hadith were admirers of Ibn Taymiyya, translating his works into Urdu. They condemned a variety of Sufi practices (supplication at graves, invoking the Prophet

in prayer, festivals for Sufi saints, wearing of amulets, celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, distributing food during religious festivals), as heretical and even idolatrous. In general, the Ahl-e Hadith embraced a literalist hermeneutic of Hadith in seeking to purify Islam of non-Islamic contaminants, intersecting with the Wahhabi movement as progenitors of contemporary anti-Sufism.²²

Illustrating the Ahl-e Hadith methodology, Shah Isma'il al-Shahid's (d. 1831) Urdu tract *Tawqiyat al-iman* suggests that "to comprehend the Quran and Hadith does not require much learning, for the Prophet was sent to show the straight path to the unwise."²³ Jonathan A. C. Brown, scholar of Islamic thought, observes that this manifesto has been widely read since its writing almost two centuries ago, first in cheap printings and now online: "it remains one of the most accessible religious texts to lay Muslims in South Asia,"²⁴ disseminating the notion that source texts are transparent, and can be readily understood and applied by nonspecialists.²⁵ The filtering of Hadith through jurisprudential methodology and/or Sufi contemplation – so characteristic of the Hanafi and Sufi-informed Islam that has dominated the South Asian Muslim scene for centuries – is totally rejected with this approach, which assumes that Hadith offer immediate, conclusive "proof" resolving all conceivable religious questions.

The phenomenon of young Muslims attempting to "correct" each other over their practice of Islam by brandishing Hadith as offering the final say are often completely unaware of the interpretive complexity that has traditionally framed Muslim reading and application of these texts. This rather simplistic usage of Hadith was affirmed by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's works such as *Kitab al-Tawhid*, which present Hadith with very little attempt to situate them as against other Hadith, the practices of early generations of Muslims (including the rulings of early caliphs and elders), or the methodological frameworks developed by the likes of Malik and Abu Hanifa. Although this approach has some continuity with Hanbali thinking,²⁶ Hanbali developed a more critical and methodologically sophisticated hermeneutics of Hadith than a great many contemporary anti-Sufi revivalists appear to evince.

Contesting theologies: Understandings of *Tawhid* and Islam

As with their approach to source texts, the revivalists of the 20th century similarly narrowed the interpretive scope of Islamic theology. Islam's central doctrine, *tawhid*, is useful to consider as an illustration here. Literally meaning "unification" or "to make one," it is the central message of the Qur'an and hence Islam's foundational doctrine. Usually translated as monotheism, God's oneness is the basis of Islam's varied schools of thought and sects. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab in particular emphasized *tawhid* as the strict limitation of veneration to God alone, without any sort of intermediary. Hence, any veneration of holy people or places is, for Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, tantamount to *shirk* or idolatry. The social implications of this understanding of *tawhid* are best represented by the Wahhabi emphasis on *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*. This is the principle of loyalty (*wala'*) to Islam and Muslims alone (true monotheists), with the concomitant distancing from (*bara'*) and disavowal of non-Muslims (idolaters),

their beliefs, customs, and practices.²⁷ The outward manifestation of this doctrine includes an emphasis on meticulously maintaining the outward signs of Islamic adherence (beards and ankle-length pants for men, and head and face coverings for women, for example) while disavowing non-Muslim styles and norms, and further purifying Muslim society from anything that smacks of a non-Islamic contaminant.

Informed by this aspect of Wahhabism, revivalists tend to seek social uniformity. Harkening back to Ibn Taymiyya's anxiety over theological, cultural, and linguistic pluralism, revivalists promote a program of purging Islamic societies of their long-standing layers of religious, cultural, and linguistic plurality. This approach shares much with 19th-century European conceptions of culture utilized in the service of ethnic nationalism. Although analytically inaccurate, these conceptions resonate during a time of crisis and, perhaps unsurprisingly, have been used by Muslim revivalists, who equate Islam with culture in this sense. They include the notion that culture is "homogeneous," "uniformly distributed among members of a group," "timeless," with an individual's identity consisting of "but a single culture."²⁸ For revivalists, then, Islam is a complete cultural system, free of "internal paradoxes and contradictions," changeless and hence applicable in the same way in all contexts, with authentic Islam similar for all Muslims, being their sole identity.²⁹ Shi'a practices, Sufi orders, culturally particular forms of Islam, are all rejected as contrary to the unified, changeless, and total nature of authentic Islam. Divine unity is read as social uniformity. Contradiction is denied rather than seen as complementary.

Missing here, arguably, is an appreciation of the way in which oneness requires multiplicity. Sufis have long considered *tawhid* in terms of both absolute oneness (*ahadiyya*) and in terms of the "manyness of oneness," or oneness diversified by its relation to manifold creation (*wahidiyya*). In this second sense of *tawhid*, according to Ibn al-'Arabi's school of thought, the pure unity of God's essence is modified by its varied relations to creation. This modification is represented by the diversity of Divine Names, each of which expresses a particular form of God's essence modified by its relationship to a created being.³⁰ The social implications of this layered metaphysic include an understanding of social oneness that preserves diversity, a "unity within diversity" as opposed to uniformity. Historically, this approach has manifested in the remarkable richness of cultural diversity and artistic expressions found within Islamic contexts shaped by Sufism. For example, Sufi missionaries were paramount in the spread of Islam in non-Arab regions, and tended to foster an integration of local culture with Islam, leading to distinctly African, Turkic, and South Asian Islamic forms.

The revivalist use of the state to enforce religious uniformity is important to mention here as well. The notable diversity of premodern Muslim societies was not only doctrinally based but also logistical in nature: it was simply unfeasible for any Muslim state prior to the modern period to enforce religio-cultural uniformity. Urban centers where empires were based could enforce orthodoxy with more effectiveness, though imperial authority decreased significantly in rural areas and outlying provinces. The technologies of the modern state, however, enable revivalists to enforce monolithic religious norms with a scope previously inconceivable in Islamic history.

As with *tawhid*, the meaning of Islam is narrowed significantly in revivalist discourse. As discussed in [Chapter 2](#), the Qur'an's description of Moses, Jesus, and Abraham as Muslims opens up Islam semantically to include the larger human history of divine guidance. Islam, then, can be read as including much of Judaism, Christianity, and, potentially, all pre-Islamic religious traditions. Sufis have tended to interpret Islam in this broad sense, leading to an openness toward other religions as previous expressions of Islam, and an acceptance of non-Muslims as people who may be saved, or may benefit from Islamic spiritual teachings regardless of their faith background.³¹ For modern revivalists, however, Islam is reduced to the historical teachings and practice of the Prophet Muhammad. This fosters a general sense within revivalist circles of other religions being outside of the fold of truth and salvation. Combined with the doctrine of *wala' wa-l-bara'*, other religions become rather dangerous contaminants to be contained, avoided, and opposed. Furthermore, intra-Islamic diversity is seen in the same light, with any practice or belief deemed to fall outside of the "saved sect" being actively countered. The meaning of "Islam" then is narrowed from referencing humanity's spiritual heritage in general to referencing the doctrine and practice of one particular sect within the Islamic tradition.³² As we see in [Chapter 4](#), it is precisely these universalistic perspectives within Sufism that attracted European Orientalists, colonial officials, poets, and philosophers.

Pedagogy and the transmission of Islamic knowledge

As a result of their hermeneutics and doctrine, revivalists tended to offer a radically simplified Islam, one harkening back to the "fundamentals" and sources of the religion, claiming to bypass the complexities of medieval jurisprudence and philosophy. Islam was repackaged as a total program that could be replicated and followed regardless of context, with the promise of solving contemporary problems in individual, family, and social life. As an outgrowth of the Salafi and Wahhabi movements, the revivalist program is largely rooted in Ibn Taymiyya's project of purifying Islam from contaminants and accretions. However, revivalists tended to selectively streamline Ibn Taymiyya's theology to make it fit within the paradigm of modern political ideologies: much of the range and complexity of Ibn Taymiyya's thought is missing from revivalist mobilizations of it.

The desire to perpetuate the essence of Islam as lived by its first generations (*salaf*) was a desire that Muslims in general tended to share. The question was how this essential, early Islam was to be accessed and lived. For revivalists, accessing the Islam of the *salaf* was thought to require simply reading early Islamic texts as manuals for individual practice and social policy. This text-based approach was a profound shift away from the premodern emphasis on the importance of religious learning within a personal, face-to-face teacher-student relationship. One's teacher was further supposed to have had a similar face-to-face learning experience that could be traced back to the Prophet, a chain of knowledge transmission, which, like a recorded chain of Hadith transmission, was known as an *isnad*. Following a complete program of study, a student would be given a formal *ijaza*, an authorization to teach, premised on the *isnad*.³³

This premodern pedagogy of the *‘ulama* assumed that accurate textual knowledge was only available within the context of *practice*. This practical context was (ideally) one in which a habitus of refined etiquette, humility, restraint, and mercy formed the container into which knowledge was poured. This habitus was believed to be the intangible aspect of the prophetic Sunna that was passed down from teacher to student over generations, a living tradition that helped secure scriptural interpretations from straying into extremes. The medieval *madrasa* system was built upon this principle of personal transmission of knowledge in a context of practice. An early scholar of Hadith, Ibn al-Mubarak (d. 797), is reported to have expressed this ethos in noting that, without a secure chain of transmission, “everyone would talk as they please.”³⁴ He suggested that seeking religious knowledge without an *isnad* was like “trying to get on to a roof without using a ladder.”³⁵ For Islamic revivalists, however, this emphasis on intangible transmission smacked of Sufism, and was largely abandoned in favor of a more modern, materialistic approach that saw knowledge not as transmission but as information, information that can be accessed by apprehending the apparent meaning of a text. This more individualistic approach is one largely divorced from the pedagogical training emphasized by the classical tradition.

Summarizing the contemporary Islamic scene

Tariq Ramadan, in his *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (2005), breaks down the complex landscape of contemporary Islam into six major tendencies, all of which will be discussed at length throughout the remainder of this chapter. The following is a concise summary of the various perspectives competing to define an authentic Islam for the 21st century. Familiarity with these broad tendencies will help readers in understanding the dynamics of contemporary Islam and Sufism’s place within it.³⁶

1. Scholastic traditionalism

Scholastic traditionalists seek to preserve and transmit the medieval crystallization of the Islamic tradition, as represented by the classical schools of jurisprudence, usually with some recognition of Sufism as the inward dimension of Islamic law and theology. Following medieval legal luminaries, scriptural commentators, and spiritual specialists it is thought to be the most reliable way to access the message of the Qur’an and Sunna.

2. Salafi literalism

Salafi literalists seek to bypass the traditional schools of jurisprudence and access the Qur’an and Sunna directly. They tend to interpret scriptural sources literally, using proof texts from scripture to justify Islamic beliefs and practices, and reject those deemed un-Islamic. Salafi literalists strongly oppose Sufism as a corruption of early Islam (the Islam of the

righteous, first generations following Muhammad, the *salaf al-salih*), which they want to revive. This interpretive tendency is usually traced to the teachings of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, and hence Salafi literalists are often referred to as Wahhabis, though they reject this term.

3. Salafi reformism

Salafi reformists also seek to return to the source texts and dynamism of early Islam. In contrast to Salafi literalists, however, they seek to interpret source texts in light of the rational "ends" or "intentions" of the law, rather than its literal application. They attempt to use reason to reinterpret source texts in light of contemporary sociopolitical circumstances. This trend emerges out of the al-Afghani, 'Abduh, and Rida's Salafiyya movement. Although generally more open to Sufism, many Salafi reformists retain 'Abduh and Rida's concerns about Sufism.

4. Political literalist Salafism

Marrying Salafi literalism with political activism, this brand of Salafism seeks to establish an "Islamic state," overthrowing secular governments in the Muslim world and opposing Western influence. Most notoriously represented by groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), this more militant tendency is sometimes referred to as "jihadism," or more recently "Jihadi-Salafism." Political literalist Salafis strongly oppose Sufism and have taken violent action against Sufis and Sufi shrines.

5. Liberal reformism

Liberal reformists seek to advance Muslim societies in light of modern, Western developments. Source texts are interpreted in light of modern philosophy and science, and Islamic practice situated within secular notions of privatized religion. Sufi texts are at times valued by liberal reformists as sources of spiritual inspiration, but Sufi orders are generally seen as anachronistic carryovers from Islam's old order.

6. Sufism

Sufis tend to be represented by the various Sufi orders and groups found throughout Muslim societies. Source texts are interpreted in light of contemplative practice, with the inner life taking some priority over life in the world. Although Islamic law and theology is usually adhered to, this adherence is understood through the teachings of the particular Sufi leader with which one is affiliated. Hence, these elements of the Islamic tradition may be de-emphasized in favor of a focus on mystical practice and development.

The spread of anti-Sufism in the 20th century

Logistically, revivalist Islam's anti-Sufism gained a powerful global momentum in the 20th century with Saudi Arabia's organized and remarkably well-funded campaign to finance and promote Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's vision of a purified Islam. As we will see in this chapter, largely under Saudi auspices, Islamic revivalism (Salafi reformism) was fused with Wahhabi theology (Salafi literalism), a phenomenon that today is usually simply referred to as Salafism. A global campaign funded by Saudi Arabia's immense petroleum wealth made itself felt across Muslim societies and communities, ushering in a transformation of Islam in the modern world. The growing persecution of religious minorities, including Sufi and Shi'a Muslims, Jews, and Christians, at the hands of Salafi/Wahhabi militias and derivative movements in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Pakistan illustrate journalist Patrick Cockburn's contention that "the 'Wahhabisation' of mainstream Sunni Islam is one of the most dangerous developments of our era."³⁷ As a global society, we are currently experiencing the effects of this transformation, and will likely continue to do so for decades to come.

Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's anti-Sufi theology made headway following his death, though it was significantly curtailed with the Ottoman-led destruction of the first Wahhabi state in Arabia (1745–1818). The remnants of the Saudi–Wahhabi movement regrouped in their home base in the Najd, making Riyadh their new capital, from which they began again to expand their influence in the peninsula.³⁸ Saudi and British interests coincided, as both sought to advance their interests in the region and weaken the Ottomans. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab mobilized latent Arab nationalism in the peninsula against the Ottomans. In 1865, the British began subsidizing the Saudis (among other contenders to power in the peninsula) – a relationship that would only grow throughout the 19th century. The Saudi–Wahhabi alliance proved more powerful than its competitors in Arabia, notably following the establishment of the *Ikhwan* or "brotherhood" (not to be confused with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood) an effective, fanatical Wahhabi fighting force in 1912. In 1915, the British signed a treaty of "friendship and cooperation" with the Saudis, involving primarily money and arms. With British aid, the Saudis again conquered Mecca and Medina in 1925. The Wahhabi enforcers began again enforcing their vision of Islam, focusing heavily on outward conformity to their understanding of Islamic norms. They demanded that men grow beards, women cover up, musical instruments be prohibited, and sacred shrines in the region, including those of the Prophet and his companions, be destroyed.³⁹ The *Ikhwan* proved at times too much even for the Saudis to control, however. Upset by the Saudi alliance with the non-Muslim British (as a violation of *bara'* or disavowal of non-believers), and the restrictions it imposed on their ability to expand and enforce Wahhabi Islam, the *Ikhwan* rebelled in 1929, and were only subdued with British military help.⁴⁰

Wahhabi influence was not contained within Arabia during the first decades of the 20th century. Scholar and former Sufi Mahmud Khattab al-Subki (d. 1933), for example, became "the most eminent exponent of Wahhabism in Egypt of

his generation.”⁴¹ His many writings utilized the works of Ibn Taymiyya to attack Sufi doctrine and practice. He founded the *al-Jam‘iyya al-shar‘iyya* in 1913, an organization that fought with Sufis for control of mosques and religious foundations, putting Egyptian Sufis on the defensive.⁴² Wahhabi perspectives were also making headway in South and Southeast Asia, with periodicals and organizations cropping up in British India and Dutch Indonesia criticizing Sufism as a deviation from early Islam.⁴³

In Arabia, Wahhabism’s future was secured in 1932 with the establishment of the Saudi Arabian kingdom. Although the Saudis at times came into conflict with Wahhabi clerics, they maintained a close alliance, in which the Wahhabi religious establishment was given the power of the state to enforce their strict religious norms domestically, and in turn Wahhabi clerics offered religious legitimation to the Saudi monarchy (which tended to abandon Wahhabi principles in its international alliances). Now consolidated in Arabia, the stage was set for Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s ideas to develop a truly global reach.

Following the discovery of vast oil reserves in the Arabian Peninsula in the 1930s, and the resulting accumulation of oil wealth, the Saudi state began a campaign to export Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s call to purify Islam of Sufi innovations throughout the world, in many ways fundamentally altering the religious landscape of Islam. This dissemination of Wahhabi thought in the latter half of the 20th century has occurred through a variety of channels. Saudi money (both public and private) has financed Islamic colleges, schools, mosques, and charities around the world, supported Islamic conferences, and funded the writing and distribution of books.⁴⁴ It should be pointed out that Saudi society, leadership, and charitable organizations are by no means homogeneous promoters of Wahhabi theology. The Saudis have been incredibly philanthropic in recent decades, funding a wide range of cultural, religious, and charitable projects around the world, many of which range across the spectrum of liberal, progressive causes, alongside more traditional religious ones. Although the social effects of Wahhabi theology have drawn concerted criticism from a variety of perspectives, it is important not to reduce the complexities of contemporary Saudi society, culture, and politics to this theology.

Wahhabism, however, has been promoted as a result of the Saudi religious establishment’s desire to spread their interpretation of Islam, and also due to the Saudi government’s interest in utilizing Wahhabism as a tool of foreign policy. The 1960s saw the emergence of an “Arab Cold War,” between Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasr’s (d. 1970) secular nationalism in Egypt and Saudi Arabia’s conservative combination of monarchy and Wahhabi Islam.⁴⁵ The Saudi establishment believed that the export of Wahhabi Islam could function as an important ideological bulwark in their struggle against regional rivals who were mobilizing around Arab nationalism, secular socialism, and later revolutionary Shi’ism, their three main ideological rivals in the Middle East in the latter part of the 20th century.

One of the most important channels through which these goals have been accomplished is an organization known as the Muslim World League (*Rabitat*

al-'Alam al-Islam).⁴⁶ Established by a group of Muslim scholars and politicians in Mecca in 1962 to counter the spread of communism and secular nationalism, the League has grown to become “the most important non-governmental international Islamic organization.”⁴⁷ From its inception, the League was a potent fusion of Salafi literalism (Wahhabism) and Salafi reformism, joining the two most prevalent forms of anti-Sufism within a single organization. Saudi Arabia’s Grand Mufti, a descendant of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, was the first head of the League.⁴⁸ Other initial members included the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna’s (d. 1949) son, Sa‘id Ramadan (d. 1995), alongside the founder of the *Jama‘at-i-Islami*, Abul Ala Maududi (d. 1979). These outgrowths of the Salafi reformist movement, also referred to as Islamists, form a key pillar of anti-Sufism in the 20th century.

Rooted in the older Salafi reformism (Massignon’s Salafiyya) of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood or *Ikhwan al-Muslimeen* and the *Jama‘at-i-Islami* have made an important contribution to marginalizing Sufism. Islamist movements have emerged as considerable challengers to secular states in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. With their claim to offer Muslims a vision of a genuine Islamic state, in contrast to state structures modeled after those of nonbelievers, Islamists have what for many Muslims are powerful claims to Islamic authenticity, claims that have great appeal considering the corruption, weakness, and religious and political confusion of the post-caliphate and postcolonial eras. Olivier Roy defines Islamism as consisting of “the activist movements who see in Islam as much a political ideology as religion.”⁴⁹ Islamists believe an Islamic state is necessary for the wholeness of Islam to be established on earth, and hence direct their efforts toward establishing a “purely” Islamic state, based on the Qur’an and Sunna. Led by modern professionals, Islamists hope to fuse a homogenized Islamic law with the modern state, rendering the *‘ulama* mostly redundant. The spiritual, ethical, and aesthetic elements of the historical Islamic tradition are downplayed, while revamped political elements are correspondingly foregrounded, leading to an Islam that is as much, if not more, an ideology than a spiritual path. Brown notes that Islamists promote the revivalist sense of the simplicity and transparency of Islamic source texts, making them easily applied by non-experts: “For Islamists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Islam was blessedly simple, common sense and ripe for personal and social implementation with no need for ulema.”⁵⁰

The idea that a modern state could be made “Islamic” was first developed by Abul Ala Maududi, a South Asian revivalist thinker who founded the *Jama‘at-i-Islami* in Lahore in 1941.⁵¹ Maududi was inspired by great Sufi revivalists (*mujaddids*) of the Mughal period, Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624) and Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762).⁵² Although Maududi came from a family descending from a branch of the Chishti Sufi order⁵³ and became thoroughly acquainted with Sufi philosophy in his religious education, he understood legitimate Sufism as simply the love of God and the Prophet shown through strict obedience to their commands (along the lines of Ibn Taymiyya’s understanding of Sufism). Despite allowing for

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